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ABSTRACT

Educators from over 30 countries judged the suitability of incidents in moral education in the context of their native environment. Participants were 54 secondary school principals or teachers, most of whom were graduate students or married to graduate students at the University of California, Santa Barbara. They were given descriptions of 23 incidents and asked which would be acceptable as lessons and which would not. For those incidents judged unsuitable, respondents indicated why by choosing among given criteria. Participants also judged whether certain types of behavior were serious issues in their native societies. The incident topics cited most often as unsuitable by the respondents were adultery (75 percent) and implied premarital sexual behavior (45 percent). Topics deemed most suitable were ones concerning cheating on homework assignments (96 percent) and a poor person stealing some of a rich man's property (88 percent). Approximately 83 percent of the issues regarded as important in the societies were judged as suitable for discussion by students. In general, more respondents from the Western democracies listed a higher proportion of important issues as being appropriate for discussion than did respondents from non-Western and Communist nations. Implications for textbook writers and for teachers are discussed. (RM)

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INCIDENTS UNSUITABLE FOR MORAL EDUCATION

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Incidents Unsuitable for Moral Education

In both the past and present a favorite technique in moral education has been that of building instruction around incidents of moral or immoral behavior. The parables of the Bible have served this function —so have Aesop's Fables, the Grimm brothers' fairy tales, and the novels of Charles Dickens and Horatio Alger, Jr. Present-day counterparts of these traditional forms of incidents are the moral-decision dilemmas used in lessons taught from either a values-clarification viewpoint or a Kohlberg perspective. 1

The first problem teachers face when organizing instruction around life-like incidents is that of distinguishing suitable from unsuitable incidents for use with a particular group of learners in a particular social environment. The study reported in the following pages focuses on this issue of separating suitable from unsuitable examples. Our intention is first to identify criteria for making this distinction, then to illustrate factors that affect educators' decisions about such matters in different societies. Finally, we propose two practical implications of the approach used in the present study. The first implication is for people who write curriculum and instruction materials in the area of moral education. The second is for administrators and teachers in individual schools where parents or faculty members are to participate in determining which moral-dilemma incidents would be most appropriate for use in the school's social-studies program.

Standards of Suitability

As a first step in the present study, we wished to identify an initial list of criteria that educators in different societal settings might use in for selecting which sorts of incidents would be appropriate for lessons in moral education. Because the three of us who were conducting the study were educators from three widely different societies (the United States, the East African nation of Zambia, and the Caribbean island of Haiti), we served as the source of this initial list. Our technique consisted of inspecting 36 diverse moral-decision incidents and deciding, from the viewpoint of a typical secondary-school headmaster in our own society, which of the incidents we would consider appropriate to use with high-school students. For each incident that we we judged as unsuitable, we explained our reasons for rejecting it.

By this process we derived four criteria of suitability/unsuitability. The four are incorporated into the following principle:

> The most suitable incidents are ones that (1) represent important, serious moral issues for the society, (2) do not involve issues which would be regarded in that society as morally too sensitive for open discussion, (3) are politically safe, and (4) are within the child's range of experience.

Our assumption is that the more an incident deviates from one or more of these criteria, the less suitable it will be as a subject of study in a moral-education program.

In selecting such standards, we recognized that the four do not exhaust the kinds of criteria educators may use for deciding the suitability of incidents. For example, a fifth criterion could be a developmental-suitability standard which states that : An incident, in order to be appropriate, must involve a type of moral decision that typical high-school youths face at least occasionally in their daily lives.(2) A sixth standard could be: The types of incidents that are most suitable are ones that involve issues of legal behavior, that is, issues concerning laws of the society. To provide an opportunity for respondents to suggest such reasons as these or others, we included on questionnaire an additional category of reasons entitled "Other" which could be used instead of the original four.

The Research Instruments

People's judgments about which incidents would be appropriate for secondary-school students in their native society were collected by means of two opinionnaires. The first consisted of a list of 23 brief descriptions of incidents. The respondents were asked to imagine that they were the headmaster of a secondary school in their homeland and to decide from that perspective which incidents would be acceptable as bases for lessons and which would not. For those incidents judged unsuitable, respondents were to indicate why. In answering why, respondents were given the choice of citing any one or more of the four criteria described above, or they could cite some separate reason of their own.

The second opinionnaire, which people filled out after completing the

first one, contained a list of 14 types of behavior: bribery, abortion, adultery, cheating on a school assignment, government officials not telling the truth to the citizens, injuring animals, making excess profit in business, overuse of drugs or alcohol, people declaring that they do not believe in God, people openly criticizing the government, premarital sexual relations, racial discrimination, stealing others' property, and tax evasion. Each of these kinds of behavior had been represented in one or more of the incidents that the respondents met on the first instrument. The respondents' task on the second opinionnaire was to judge each of the listed behaviors in terms of whether it was a serious issue in their native society. Specifically, they rated each behavior as (1) very important, (2) somewhat important, or (3) not important as a moral issue. The purpose of including the second opinionnaire was to provide information that might indicate the extent to which the most serious moral issues in their society were ones respondents believed would be suitable for study in a secondary school.

The Sample of Respondents

A total of 54 people participated in the study. They were selected to represent diverse societies. The number of nations represented was 30. There was one person from each of the following countries: Angola, Australia, Belgium, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guiana, Japan, Mali, Mexico, Norway, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, the Sudan, Thailand, Turkey, the Soviet Union, West Germany, and Zaire. Countries represented by two respondents were the People's Republic of China (Communist China), Haiti, Hungary, Kenya, South

Korea, and Zambia. There were three from India, from France, and from Malaysia; four from Egypt and from the Republic of China (Taiwan); and seven from the United States.

All but five of the 54 respondents were either graduate students or their spouses at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Their average age was 31 years, with the ages of the middle two-thirds of the sample ranging from 26 to 36. All but four of the participants had attended secondary school in their home country, and most had subsequently served as educators there. (For example, the U.S. Americans included three public high-school social-studies teachers, a principal of a secular private secondary school, a teacher of religion in a Catholic high school, a teacher of moral education in an evangelical Protestant secondary school, and a university professor who wrote moral-education materials for use in secondary schools). Thus, it was assumed that they would have a good idea of what moral-behavior topics would be suitable for discussion in a typical secondary school in their home nation.

Such a selection of respondents as this obviously cannot be considered a representative sample in the sense of accurately reflecting the opinions held by the general population of secondary-school principals or teachers in the 30 nations. Rather, this sample is offered as illustrative, meaning that the opinions expressed by the 54 respondents illustrate the viewpoints that would likely be expressed by at least a portion of the educators in those 30 nations. How representative such illustrative opinions might be would seem to vary from one topic to another and from one nation to another. In some

societies the nation's educators are in general agreement about whether a particular topic would be appropriate for discussion in school, whereas in others the opinion about a given topic can vary from school to school or even among the staff members of a single school. In at least a few instances, the representativeness of opinions expressed by people in the present study can be estimated through use of generally available information about the nations in question. A case in point is the pattern of responses to the following incident that appeared on the 23-item questionnaire.

> Mr. L said, "There's a lot of inefficiency and corruption in the government. We should go to the newspapers and have them print information about government waste and corruption."

Respondents who judged this incident as politically unsuitable for discussing in a high school included those from the nations of Ethiopia, Guiana, Haiti, Hungary, Malaysia, South Korea, Taiwan, the Soviet Union, Zaire, and Zambia. Respondents who judged the incident suitable for discussion in secondary schools included ones from Australia, Belgium, France, India, Japan, Norway, the United States, and West Germany. Information from generally available sources about conditions of political freedom-of-speech in these countries would tend to corroborate the opinions expressed by participants in the present study.

However, in the case of other topics on the questionnaire, how typical the opinions in the present study would be of the general population of educators in the 30 nations cannot readily be estimated. In such instances, we have considered the responses only illustrative of the views that at least a

portion of the nations' educators might hold.

The Survey Results

The outcomes of the study are reported first for the questionnaire containing the 23 moral-decision incidents, then for the questionnaire regarding the importance of 14 moral issues in various societies.

THE 23 MORAL-DECISION INCIDENTS. The first question to be answered from the data is: Which moral-decision topics were most often judged unsuitable by the 54 respondents? The moral issue cited most often as the least suitable (75 percent of the respondents) was that of adultery, with about half of the respondents rejecting the topic because it was judged morally too sensitive in their society and the other half because adultery was thought to be too remote from students' experience for them to have a considered opinion about the issue. The incident involving adultery appeared on the survey instrument in the following form:

> The husband told his friend, "Yes, I have had some sexual relations with a different woman than my wife. You see, my wife is hardly at all interested in having sexual relations with me."

Next to adultery, the topic judged most often as unsuitable (45 percent) was that of implied premarital sexual behavior, as reflected in the following incident.

> The college boy and college girl are living together in that one-bedroom apartment, though they are not married.

Slightly over half of those who judged the topic as inappropriate did so on the belief that it was morally too sensitive. The rest of the respondents who rejected the item believed that the issue was irrelevant, because such an incident rarely if ever would occur in their society.

Next in frequency among unsuitable topics (at 39 percent) was open criticism of inefficiency and corruption in the government. In fourth place (37 percent) were two types of special treatment of people on the basis of their ethnic status (separating pupils in schools by their language background and refusing to sell real estate to people of a given ethnic origin). Ranked fifth was an incident involving abortion for an unwed high-school girl (36 percent).

When the foregoing items are analyzed in terms of the national backgrounds of the respondents, a fairly clear pattern emerges for the sex-relation items (adultery, premarital sex, abortion). All of these items were judged suitable for most Western, industrialized societies (Australia, Belgium, France, Norway, Puerto Rico, and the United States) and for Mexico, Turkey, and Zambia. None of these items was judged suitable for certain "developing" societies (Communist China, Egypt, Guiana, Haiti, Hungary, Kenya, Malaysia, South Korea, the Sudan, Thailand, and Zaire). For a number of other societies, the issue of adultery was regarded as unsuitable, but the teen-age abortion incident was considered appropriate (Angola, Ghana, India, Japan, Mali, the Philippines, Taiwan, and the Soviet Union).

As noted earlier, a similar pattern of countries emerged for the issue of openly criticizing the government.

In regard to the two items that involved treating people differently on the basis of their ethnic background, the topic was judged suitable by respondents from Belgium, France, Germany, India, Japan, Mali, Mexico, Norway, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, the Sudan, and the United States. For the remaining countries, the two ethnic issues were regarded as irrelevant for the particular society or else one of the topics was considered relevant and the other not. Neither of the topics was judged morally or politically too sensitive for discussion among high-school students.

The second question to be answered is: Which topics did most of the respondents agree were suitable for analysis by secondary-school students? The topics, and the percents of respondents deeming them suitable, were ones concerning cheating on homework assignments (96 percent), a poor person stealing a small portion of a rich person's property (88 percent), the amount of profit a person realizes from a business transaction (82 percent), teen-age vandalism (82 percent), and a teen-ager taking money from a parent's purse (78 percent).

Between the foregoing least-suitable and most-suitable topics were incidents bearing on issues of bribery, injuring animals, government officials deceiving the citizens, people not believing in God, overuse of drugs or alcohol, and tax evasion. In general, these topics were somewhat more often judged appropriate in more technologically modern societies than in traditional, developing societies.

THE 14 MORAL TOPICS. The list of 14 moral issues was used in determining

to what degree the topics judged very important by respondents were ones thought to be suitable for secondary-school students to discuss. The method of analysis consisted of (1) discovering for the entire sample of 48 respondents the kinds of issues considered most and least serious for their societies and (2) identifying what percents of the very important and somewhat important issues were judged acceptable for student discussions.

For the entire sample of 54, the five issues most often cited as very important were those of bribery (60 percent), open criticism of the government (57 percent), teen-age abortion (43 percent), overuse of drugs and alcohol (43 percent), theft (41 percent), and tax evasion (41 percent). The four items most frequently judged as not serious moral issues were those of people not believing in God (75 percent), injuring animals (50 percent), adultery (50 percent), and premarital sexual relations (50 percent).

The decision about the extent to which important moral matters in a society were considered suitable for high-school students to discuss was based on matching suitable issues in incidents on the first questionnaire with very important and somewhat important issues on the second questionnaire. However, first it is important to recognize that there were marked differences among respondents in the number and kinds of issues they considered very, somewhat, and not important, even respondents from the same society. For example, one of the Americans rated 12 of the issues as very important and the remaining 2 as somewhat important, whereas another American rated 5 as very important, 2 as somewhat important, and the remaining 7 as not important.

The first question answered in the analysis of the data was: On the average, what percent of the issues that a respondent rated as important in the society were topics that the respondent regarded as unsuitable for high-school students? For the sample as a whole, 8 percent of the very-important issues and 9 percent of the somewhat-important matters were judged as inappropriate. The most frequently cited reason for avoiding such topics in school was that of morally too sensistive (33 percent). The second most frequent was not relevant for that society (27 percent). Third was politically too sensitive (20 percent), fourth was beyond the students' experience (15 percent), and last was other reasons (5 percent). The kinds of other reasons cited included: too trivial, too vulgar, might encourage cheating, racist, religiously improper, and embarrassing for students.

In summary, on the average the great majority (83 percent) of the issues regarded as important in the societies were judged as suitable for discussion by high-school students. In general, more respondents from the Western, industrialized democracies listed a higher proportion of important issues as being appropriate for discussion in school as than was true of respondents from non-Western and communist nations.

Practical Implications

In addition to the foregoing results suggesting varied patterns of selecting moral topics in different societies, there are at least two practical applications of the methodology described above. The first is for writers of curriculum and instructional materials, and the second is for staff members of a particular school.

Writers of moral education materials can profit from preparing incidents, anecdotes, stories, or cases involving diverse moral issues and submitting the items to be judged for their suitability by those school authorities empowered to decide on the appropriateness of learning materials. The results of such judgments can serve as a guide to authors regarding what moral issues will be acceptable in the schools for which the text materials are intended. Depending upon the particular society and types of schools involved, the authorities might be school administrators, school-board members, religious leaders, political and military figures, business leaders, or representatives of ethnic groups. The two questionnaires not only focus the authorities' attention on a variety of moral issues, but they also make it necessary for the respondents to specify the criteria they are using to determine the appropriateness of moral topics.

A second application can be within an individual school in which the staff wishes to determine what sorts of moral-education topics are most appropriate for study. The two types of questionnaires used in the present study can be prepared for use by the faculty, with the compiled results then serving as the focus of a discussion of the kinds of issues to include in the curriculum and the reasons for focusing on such issues. Such questionnaires can be used as well as the basis for a discussion of moral matters among parents or students. During the discussions it will become apparent that some of the respondents will accept the incidents exactly as they have been written. Others, however, will accept the underlying moral issue but will wish to reword the incident to make it more relevant or morally and politically more

acceptable for use with students.

NOTES

1 For examples, see: Richard H. Hersh, Diana Pritchard Paolitto, and Joseph Reimer, Promoting Moral Growth (New York: Longman, 1979); Lawrence Kohlberg, "Stages of Moral Development as a Basis for Moral Education" in C.M. Beck, B.S. Crittenden, and E.V. Sullivan (eds.), Moral Education. (New York: Newman Press, 1971); Louis E. Rathhs, Merrill Harmin, and Sidney Simon, Values and Teaching (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill, 1966); Sidney Simon, Leland W. Howe, and Howard Kerschenbaum, Values Clarification: A Handbook of Practical Strategies for Teachers and Students (New York: Hart, 1972).

2 Hersh, Paolitto, and Reimer, op. cit., pp. 302-232.